

Mechanism of getting a socially high status in a Sepik society, New Guinea

**'To buy' a dance makes you a big man :
Mechanism of getting a socially high status in a
Sepik society, New Guinea**

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to describe and analyse the custom of 'buying' dances in the Buna language group of the lower reaches area of Sepik River, Papua New Guinea¹⁾. Many dances in the Sepik area have been transferred, and the people say that they 'bought' and 'sold' these dances. Although the custom of 'buying' and 'selling' dances are commonly seen in the Sepik area, very few anthropologists have ever mentioned this custom²⁾.

This paper describes the cases of 'buying' dances in the Buna language group and refers to the mechanism of getting social prestige in the society by 'buying' dances.

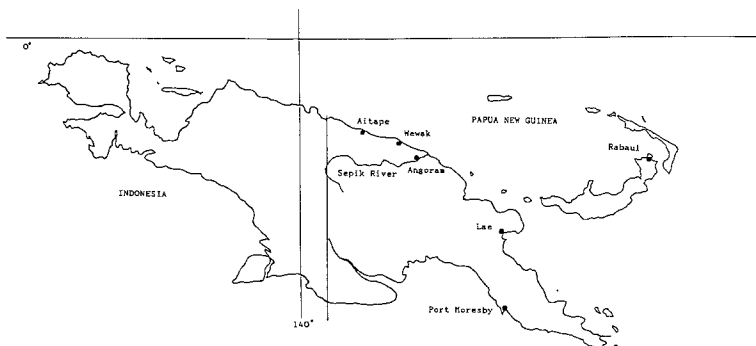
Buna language group

The research area on which this paper is based is the Buna language group³⁾, and the research was focused mainly on Mangan village. The Buna language group inhabit around the Marienberg Catholic station, 30

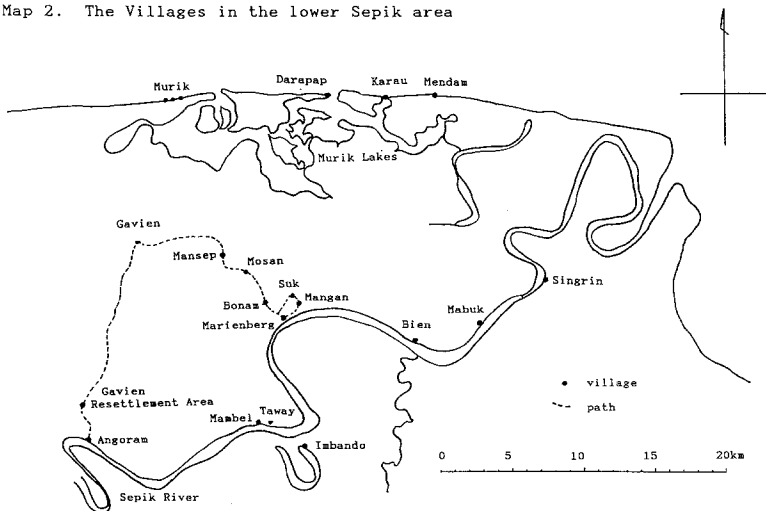
kilometers down from Angoram township in East Sepik Province (see Map 1,2). They numbered almost 1000 persons in 1980, and the group consists of seven villages; Gavien, Mansep, Mosan, Mangan, Suk, Mambel and Bonam. The population of the villages varies from 30 to 200⁴⁾.

Buna language belongs to Marienberg stock-level family, which is

Map 1. New Guinea



Map 2. The Villages in the lower Sepik area



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under Torricelli phylum. It consists of three dialects; the Gavien people speak Northern Buna Dialect, and the Mosan speak Mosan dialect, and the other five villages, Mangan, Mansep, Mambel, Suk and Bonam speak Southern Buna Dialect. The lower Sepik area has another language which is called Angoram, and it is under Nor-pondu Sub-Phylum, which group, belongs to Sepik Ramu Phylum⁵). It is spoken in the villages of Bien, Mabuk, Singrin, Taway and Imbanda (see Map 2).

Although Buna language group has three dialects, the people also speak Melanesian Pidgin, which is a lingua franca in Papua New Guinea (or it is called Neo-Melanesian, or Tok Pisin in Pidgin itself). It is spoken commonly in Papua New Guinea, and together with Hiri Motu which is widely spoken in Papuan area, it is one of the two official common languages in the country⁶). Melanesian Pidgin is most popular in the Sepik area, and the people use it as the lingua franca, partly because the dialects are quite different from each other, and partly because they often get their wife from the other language groups, and they speak Pidgin in their family in these cases. Their children speak both Melanesian Pidgin and the vernacular language even in the Buna language area, and most people are bilingual. Another reason why they do not speak their vernacular language is that some people spend fairly a long time in towns and cities, where they get a work or they get high-school level education, and they seldom use their vernacular language when they are away from their village. After they return to their village, they are not fluent in speaking Buna language.

The subsistence economy of the Buna is based on getting the carbohydrate of sago palms. The people have four main food ; sweetpotato, taro, yam and sago. These are supplemented by fish, pork, bananas and

greens. But the most important food is sago. Sago palms grow along the Sepik River and its tributaries, and the people get carbohydrate from these sago palms as their staple food. Sago is usually eaten in the form of jelly (hatwara in Pidgin) with vegetables and/or fish.

'To buy' a dance

'To buy a dance' is an expression in Pidgin or native languages⁷⁾, and has been the custom that is often performed in the Sepik area. The people use the expression, 'baim singsing' or 'bain danis' in Pidgin, and 'baim' means to buy and 'singsing' and 'dance' means dance⁸⁾. 'Baim singsing' in Pidgin, therefore, means 'to buy a dance' literally⁹⁾. But after someone 'sells' a dance to others, he is still allowed to perform the dance. 'To buy' a dance, therefore, actually means to get the right to perform the dance by giving something to the holder of the dance.

I will take one example, the dance of awani in Mangan village. It is Stephen Awan of Mangan village who 'bought' the dance. He gave some pigs, fowls, sago, many bundles of betelnuts and so on to the dance-holder of the Murik, who live between the coast and Murik Lakes (see Map 1, 2). But the holder of the Murik still sometimes perform the dance. The Murik 'sold' the dance to Stephen Awan, but it actually means to give the right of the dance. After someone 'buys' a dance, he can sell it to others. Stephen Awan, therefore, has the right to 'sell' the dance of awani to others.

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Dances of Mangan village

To show the custom of 'buying' and 'selling' dances in the lower Sepik area, I will take the example of dances in Mangan village. The Mangan people have five kinds of dances¹⁰⁾. Three of these are the dances of fish: the first one is the dance of female fish and is called awani, the second is the dance of male fish, and is called magani, the third is of long-nosed fish, and is called parem. The fourth one is called kumbun, and it is performed by several men with a long cap (it is called tumbuan in Melanesian pidgin) when the moon is out and clearly seen. The fifth one is called samban, and is only performed by women (see Table 1).

Each dance belongs to individuals respectively. Awani and magani belongs to Stephen Awan, parem belongs to Persio Bogi, and kumbun to Boge. Samban is not often performed and its holder is not known any more to the villagers.

Table 1. The Dances of Mangan Village and their holders

awani	(the dance of female fish)	Stephen Awan
magani	(the dance of male fish)	Stephen Awan
parem	(the dance of long-nosed fish)	Persio Bogi
kumbun	(the dance of <u>tumbuan</u>)	Boge
samban	(the dance for women)	unknown

These five dances have come from the other areas than Mangan village. Awani, magani and parem came from Murik Lakes area. That is, the people 'bought' the dances from the Murik. Stephen Awan gave many things to the holders of the awani and magani in the Murik and 'bought'

the dances. Kumbun came from Rabaul in New Britain Island. As for samban, people do not know any more where it actually came from.

All of the five dances in Mangan village are not native to the village. In other words, the Mangan people 'bought' all of these dances from the other villages. But it is not certain whether the Mangan village did not have any native dances. It is a possible explanation that the people used to have some dances and have lost them. Since Germany first occupied New Guinea in 1884, the people in these areas have seen great changes, and they might have lost all of the dances that they used to have. Missionaries arrived in the 1910s, and the war of 1914-1915 and prolonged Japanese occupation had serious effects on these areas. Consequently, the life of these areas has greatly changed; more than 90 per cent of the people have become Christians, and most of them make it a rule to go to church every Sunday, a small store is open in Marienberg station, and the people buy packed rice, kerosene, tinned fish and many other things in the store. The people might have lost dances after these great changes. Or there is a strong possibility that they 'bought' dances just because they had lost all of their dances and they did not have any.

Three of the five dances in Mangan village came from Murik Lakes area, but two of them are not native to the Murik. As the Mangan people 'bought' dances from the Murik, they also 'bought' them from the other areas. Parem came from somewhere around Aitape of West Sepik Province, a town located some 150 kilometers west to Wewak, and awani came from Timilio, an area of West Sepik Province¹¹⁾ (see Table 2).

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Table 2. The Dances of Mangan Village and the routes of introduction

awani	←	Murik Lakes	←	Timilio (West Sepik)
magani	←	Murik Lakes	←	unknown
parem	←	Murik Lakes	←	Aitape (West Sepik)
kumbun	←	Rabaul	←	unknown
samban	←	unknown		

Procedures of 'buying' a dance

In order 'to buy' a dance, people have to go through some formalities. When A 'buys' a dance from B, A firstly has to invite B and B's members to A's village. Usually dances are performed by dozens of people, who are the relatives and/or village members of the holder, and B takes them to A's village. Before B's group comes to A's village, A sets a stake in the open space of the village, and ties a pig to the stake and waits for B's group¹²⁾ to come.

B's group is invited to A's village 'to sell' a dance. They prepare for performing the dance; they wear formal costume for the dancing, they paint their bodies and faces, and they prepare musical instruments. They come to A's village dancing as a group. After proceeding into the open space, they get the pig which was tied to the stake. Then, B's group keep dancing for a long time and show A how to perform the dance; they show the footstep of the dance, the melody, rhythm and the texts of the song, and how to play the musical instruments.

A serves food and drink to B's group while they stay in A's village. After B's group perform the dance, B's group leave their musical instruments, the ornaments and other things which are necessary for the dance.

A gives pigs (either live ones or in the form of pork), food and other things to B's group when they leave A's village.

The merit of 'buying' a dance

'To buy' a dance costs the Buna a lot. When someone 'buys' a dance from others, he usually has to give several pigs, fowls, much sago and many other things, and he must serve food and drink while the dance-holder's group show how to dance. After cash economy penetrated to these area, even cash must be paid to 'buy' a dance. Only rich men, therefore, can 'buy' dances. In the case of awani and magani, Stephen Awan gave the dance-holder many pigs, fowls, much taro and yam, bananas, betelnuts and even cash. Boge, who is now the holder of kumbun dance, says that he paid as much as 500 Kina¹³⁾ when he 'bought' the dance in Rabaul. The Buna people, however, have almost no cashcrops. They grow in their garden sweetpotatoes, bananas, beans, pawpaws, but what they can do is to get only small money by selling them in the open market, which is held twice a week in Marienberg station. They can only get as much as 5 kina per day, and they spend the money on kerosene and other things in the store in Marienberg and only little is left to them.

Then, why do the people 'buy' dances although it costs them a lot? One reason can be easily found. If you 'buy' a dance and hold it, you can 'sell' it to others. Three of the dances in Mangan village came from Murik Lakes area, and at least two of them came from the other areas than Murik Lakes, which means the Murik people 'bought' dances and 'sold' them to the Mangan. The Murik gave much to the dance-holders, but they also have got much by 'selling' them to the Mangan. 'To sell' a dance actually

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means to give the right to perform the dance, and you still have the right to perform the dance after you 'sell' it.

Another reason why the people 'buy' dances by spending many things and much money is related to the mechanism of getting social prestige in the society.

The fact that the people have little way to get cash and only rich men can 'buy' dances gives the dance-holders social prestige and socially high status in the area. Everybody knows who holds each dance, and talks how much the holders gave or paid when they 'bought' dances.

Melanesian societies are generally characterized by the absence of traditional chiefs and rise of political entrepreneurs, and they show broad contrasts to Polynesian societies, such as Hawaii, Tonga and Society Islands, which have elaborate forms of rank and chieftainship. The Melanesian have no positions of 'chief' with a few exceptions, but they have a different kind of leader, who is locally called 'big-man'. Big-man is not the office which is hereditarily succeeded like 'chief' in Polynesian societies, but the status of big-man is attained by personal power, and is the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common people. Big-man is not a political title, but an acknowledged standing in inter-personal relations¹⁴⁾.

To become a big-man, therefore, one must be prepared to demonstrate that he possesses the kinds of skills that command respect – magical powers, gardening prowess, mastery of oratorical style, perhaps bravery in war and feud¹⁵⁾.

What skill is important to get the respect of followers varies from society to society. For example, in Maring society of New Guinea Highlands¹⁶⁾, recruitment to the status of big-man appears to be based on a

number of criteria: age and physical strength, temperament, physical attractiveness, relationship to powerful clansmen, evidence of support of spirits, and ability to communicate with ancestor spirits¹⁷⁾, and so on.

If someone wants to become a big-man, he must get his followers and get the respect of them. The way to get respect varies from tribe to tribe, and 'to buy' a dance in the Buna is a way to get the respect of his followers and to get social prestige in the society. Although the Buna do not have the typical form of leadership of big-man¹⁸⁾, the way to get a high status is the same as in other societies in New Guinea; to get respect of the people. Magical power is not considered to be high value in the Buna, since it is not much related to their daily life, although the Buna believe in it. Physical appearance is important in that one can attract girls' attention, and it gives the possibility to have many wives and to elevate his status with it. But most of the Buna have become Christians and they can get only one wife, and physical appearance is, therefore, not crucial to get socially high status in the society. 'To buy' a dance and to hold it is one of the clearest ways to get social prestige in the Buna.

The Occasions of Performing Dances in the Buna

'To buy' and to have the right to perform dances gives the holder a high status in the village, but in order to get higher status, to hold the dance is not enough. He must show the dance in public and let the people know how attractive the dance is and who holds the dance. For example, Boge, a very old man in Mangan village holds the dance of kumbun, but the kumbun is not often performed recently, and Boge is not treated any more as having a high status in the village¹⁹⁾. The prestige of 'buying' and

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holding dances is strengthened by the action of performing the dances in public. There are several occasions of dancing in public in the Buna; first, when they have a feast which is held about one year after someone in the village dies, and secondly when they have a special guest in the village, such as the priest or the bishop of the Catholic Mission, or politicians like parliament members, and thirdly, when they celebrate a special thing, such as the Independence Day of the country, Papua New Guinea.

Which dance should be performed in each occasion is decided in the discussions of adult men in the village. Each village has several kinds of dancing, but usually only one or two dances are performed in each occasion. The village members, therefore, have to decide which dance they should perform. In the case of the feast in 26th December, 1984, which was held in Mosan village, the dances of awani and magani were performed as the dances, of Mangan village. This is the first type of the occasions when they perform dances. A woman of Mosan died about one year before the feast, and the Mosan invited all the Buna people to their village, and had a feast. They say that they had the feast in order to stop lamenting over the dead²⁰⁾. Three of the seven villages in the Buna performed the dances; Mangan, Mambel and Mansep. The Mangan performed the dances of awani and magani, and the Mambel performed a dance which is called maimai, and the Mansep performed a dance which is quite similar to awani of Mangan village²¹⁾.

To show dances in public gives the dance-holder not only an opportunity to get prestige, but also an opportunity 'to sell' the dance. If people find an attractive dance, they try 'to buy' it and try to get prestige by 'buying a dance'. When they have a feast, most of the Buna get together, and even other language people often join them. To show dances in public

is, therefore, a good occasion for the dance-holder to announce how wonderful dance he has, and attract the people's attention.

'To buy' a dance in other areas in Papua New Guinea

Although very few anthropologists have mentioned the custom of 'buying dances', it has been commonly done in Sepik societies. The people of West Sepik Province 'sold' dances to the Murik, and Kaberry mentioned that the mountain Arapesh also 'buy' dances and ceremonies²²⁾. The Chambri in the middle Sepik have the same dance as parem, and they got the dance from Murik Lakes area, although it is not clear whether they 'bought' the dance or not²³⁾. The area that this custom is held does not seem to be restricted to the Sepik area. For example, Boge in Mangan village 'bought' the dance of kumbun in Rabaul of New Britain Island²⁴⁾, which is located some 900 kilometers away from Mangan village (see Map 1). Although it is not certain that the people in Rabaul (the Tolai) have the custom of 'buying' dances, they use the expression 'baim singing' when they get dances²⁵⁾.

Conclusion

'Baim' in Pidgin is used in several ways. According to Mihalic, it has two major meanings; one is to buy or to purchase, and the other to pay or recompense²⁶⁾. But the meaning varies widely, depending on the context; 'baim meri' (meri means woman, girl or wife) means to get a wife and to pay the brideprice, 'baim balus' (balus means airplane) means to pay one's plane fare, and 'baim skulfi' means to pay one's school fee. It is possible,

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therefore, to interpret the expression 'baim singsing' as the meaning of learning the way of dancing from the dance-holder and giving something in reward for the teaching, not as the meaning of getting the right to perform the dance by giving something to the holder. That is, when the Mang'an 'bought' dances, the interpretation would be that they learned how to perform dances from other areas and after learning them, they paid many things and much money for the teaching. But as I mentioned, people have to go through several formalities when they 'buy' dances. This fact shows that to 'buy' dances means not to learn dances and reward the teaching, but to get the right of dances by giving something to dance-holders²⁷⁾.

The Buna people try to 'buy' dances to show that they have enough wealth 'to buy' them, and try to get social prestige. They can elevate their status by 'buying' dances and at the same time, they have the right 'to sell' them and have an possibility of making a profit by 'selling' them.

Notes

- 1) This study is based mainly on three periods of fieldwork; the first one is from May 1984 to October 1985, and the second from December 1985 to March 1986, and the third from July to August in 1987. The first fieldwork was financed by the Ishizaka Foundation, and the third by the Institute for Asian Studies in Asia University. To these two institutions I am very grateful for enabling me to undertake my long fieldwork. In the pre-field and post-field period, I was supervised by Professor Shozo Masuda of the University of Tokyo and Dr. Daryl K. Feil of the University of Sydney. I should like to thank them for their advice and discussions. The draft of this paper was presented to the 2nd meeting of a joint studies program of the National Museum of Ethnology. The program is titled 'The Study of tradi-

tional societies in Papua New Guinea,' and is represented by Dr. Shuji Yoshida. I am grateful for helpful discussions to Dr. Shuji Yoshida, Dr. Sachiko Hatanaka, Mr. Hisafumi Saito, Mr. Hiroyuki Kurita and the other members of the project.

- 2) Kaberry mentioned in her paper that the Abelam people do not buy dances and ceremonies, although the mountain Arapesh do (Kaberry 1941-1942, p. 241).
- 3) I have no information indicating where the name of 'Buna' came from. The people call the language kakra in their own language.
- 4) 'According to the 1980 census of Papua New Guinea, the population of these villages were respectively; Gavien 52, Mansep 151, Mosan 99, Bonam 31, Mangan 171, Suk 48 and Mambel 246. Besides these villages, Marienberg Catholic station had a population of 214 (Toyoda 1987b).
- 5) Laycock, D. C. 1975, Laycock, D. C. & J. Z'Graggen 1975.
- 6) Melanesian Pidgin is a lingua franca in Melanesia, and is widely spoken in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.
- 7) In Buna language, people use the expression yo:bwasi bikirei, which literally means to buy a dance. But it is questionable whether they used to have the expression 'to buy' originally. Many expressions in Buna language are quite similar to those of Pidgin, and it is reasonable to assume that some of them have borrowed Pidgin's expressions. Pidgin is so influential that old people often complain that those who speak Pidgin use many Pidgin-like expressions when they speak Buna language, and that it is becoming similar to Pidgin.
- 8) Both 'singsing' and 'danis' means dance or to dance, but strictly speaking, 'singsing' is used to mean traditional dance or song, and 'danis' is used to mean modern dance, such as discotheque dance. To express the custom of

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'buying' dances, 'baim singsing' is more often used.

- 9) Mihalic, F. 1971.
- 10) When I conducted my initial fieldwork, I got the information that the dances of awani and magani should be counted as one, and I mentioned that the Mangan have four kinds of dancing in my paper (Toyoda, Y. 1987b). When I made my third fieldwork, however, I found that these two should be counted separately. My paper was wrong in this point.
- 11) I could not identify the location of the place, Timilio.
- 12) Each village has an open space in the center of the village, and the people perform dances and have a feast there.
- 13) Kina is the currency of Papua New Guinea, and one kina almost equaled one US dollar in October, 1985.
- 14) Sahlins, M. D. 1966, pp. 163–165.
- 15) *ibid.*, p. 167.
- 16) The Maring live along the border line between Madang Province and Western Highland Province, which is a part of the Highlands fringe area. (Lowman-Vayda, C. 1971)
- 17) Lowman-Vayda, C. 1971, p. 330–331.
- 18) Although the Buna use the expression 'big-man' in Pidgin, it only means an old man or old men, and it does not relate to the status in the society.
- 19) Boge had kept two long caps (tumbuan in Pidgin) for the dance of kum-bun, but one day, he burnt them away, probably because he thought that the dance would not be performed any more.
- 20) When I conducted my initial fieldwork, I got the information that this feast was held just in order to celebrate Christmas (Toyoda, Y. 1987a, 1987b). But when I made my third fieldwork, I found that this was held because it was one year after a Mosan woman died. My papers were wrong in

this point.

- 21) I had no opportunity to get the name of this dance of Mansep village.
- 22) Kaberry, 1941-42, p. 241.
- 23) The Chambri call the dance barem, but it is the same as parem (Personal communication with Mr. Takanori Fujita, Osaka University).
- 24) Personal communication with Mr. Hisafumi Saito, Tokyo Metropolitan University.
- 25) Boge 'bought' the dance of kumbun when he stayed in Rabaul. He was recruited to a plantation in Rabaul, and worked there for a few years. The Tolai might be one of few tribes in east New Guinea who have the custom of 'buying' dances, and it might be a coincidence that Boge went to the place where he could 'buy' dances in foreign area, far from Mangan village.
- 26) Mihalic, F. 1971, p. 63.
- 27) This will be clearly ascertained if we can show the exact meaning of the expression 'to buy' in vernacular languages. But Buna language and also the other languages in the Sepik area have been greatly influenced by Pidgin, and many expressions in native languages have come from Pidgin. It is very hard, therefore, to know the original usage of the words. Next, the meaning of the custom of 'buying' dances might be ascertained by the criterion whether the way of dancing has any secrecy or not. If it has any secrecy, it is reasonable to say that the right of performing dances is transmitted to others. If not, the custom of 'buying' dances might be interpreted as just learning dances. It is, however, also difficult to find the secrecy of dances, because the dances in these area have changed their forms very much after social changes. It might have had secrecy, but none of the dances in Mangan village has any secrecy now. We cannot judge, therefore, by these criterie.

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